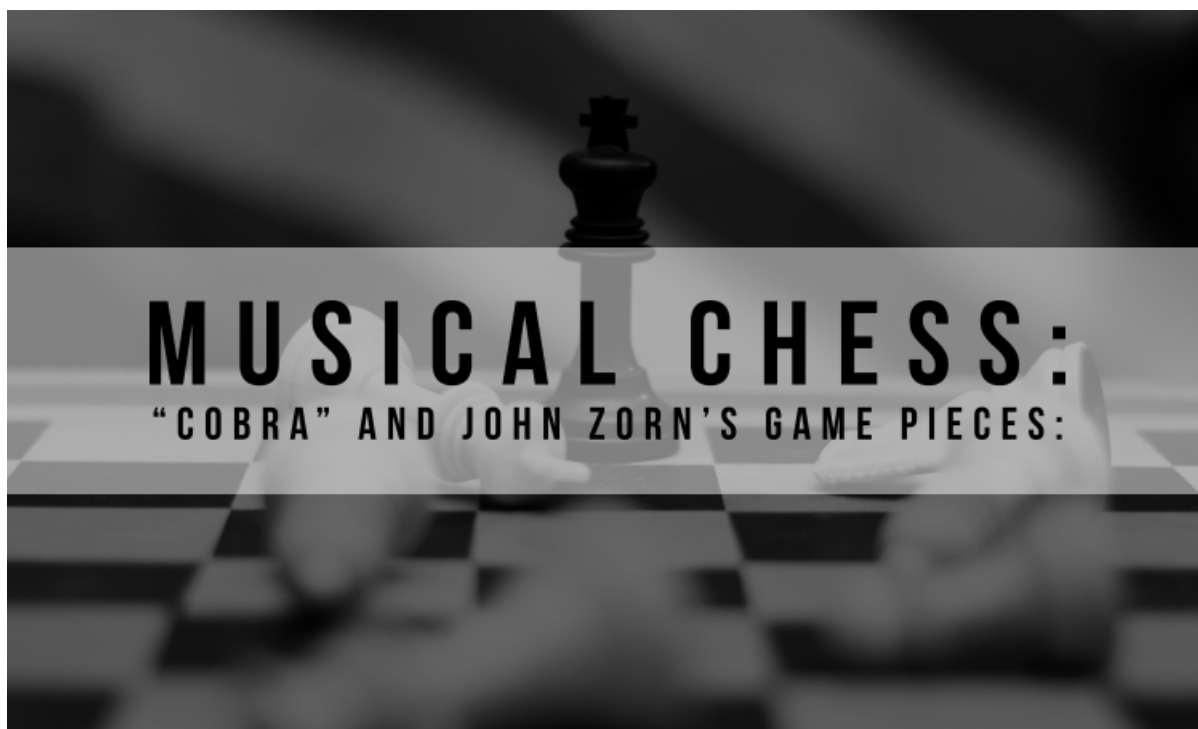


# “Cobra” and John Zorn’s Game Pieces – Heavy Blog Is Heavy

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11-14 minutes

## Musical Chess: “Cobra” and John Zorn’s Game Pieces



While we will never come up with a universally accepted description of what separates art from the rest of reality, we can make some easy guesses about it—namely, that art, in one way or another, derives its meaning and beauty from structure. The quadrivium—one of the oldest examples of pedagogy in Western thought—includes music as one of its pillars because of art’s importance and reliance on these aforementioned elements; after all music is quite literally math in motion. Any sound, from the buzz of a crowd to the slap of a bass guitar to the clinks and clangs of machinery, can be said to have a certain pitch and be a certain length of time, and can therefore be considered to be privy to certain rules, even if we have made up said rules. But, as with any rule or law, it cannot exist without offenders to truly define it. A society without murder wouldn’t need (nor could even comprehend) a law barring its use. (If you want to get simpler, it’s yin and yang—one part cannot exist without the other.) This, however, is where improvisation comes into the conversation of music, as it completes the circle. The serpent is now metaphorically biting its own tail.

Yet what happens when yin and yang combine into one, and what would an art that can melt these two halves together be like? The two sides are integral, but we often miss the bigger sign the two halves make. We often like to think of our world in terms of black

and white, when in reality gray permeates. I cannot say whether or not avant-garde composer **John Zorn** had this sort of philosophy in mind when he created his game pieces, but it perhaps best represents what this type of music is all about. We are not diving into the world of free jazz, nor the world of baroque monophony—this is about opposites meeting in a musical way that I personally find incredible.

## What is Improvisation?

Essentially? Chaos. To improvise is disregard the rules and spontaneously creating something by following nothing but the mind at the present moment. It's been used in virtually every medium of art, from the poetry of Jack Kerouac to the paint splatters of Jackson Pollock and everything in between.

If you want an official definition, according to [OnMusic Dictionary](#), improvisation is, “[the] term referring to the spontaneous performance of music without previous preparation or any written notes. This concept dates back to even Medieval music, but it's perhaps best remembered as a (relatively) recent revolution in modern music. The twentieth century saw musical improvisation take off in a big way with the advent of free jazz and pioneering efforts in the fringes of modern classical music. Artists and composers from **Ornette Coleman** to **Stockhausen** took this idea and expanded and experimented with it until it was something completely new, and, in Coleman's case, structure is ultimately abandoned—what we now refer to as free improvisation. A free improv musician will simply walk up on stage—perhaps with a few other fellow musicians—and play what comes out.

While this may look and sound crude, perhaps even childish, it's far from it. To truly improvise is to have such a masterful, virtuosic grip upon medium that there is no thought. Zorn, in the liner notes of his *Classic Guide To Strategy* (the beginning of a series of albums containing nothing but improvisations using a variety of woodwind instruments), writes:

“How did this [album] come about? The answer is a lot simpler than the result. Thousands of hours of playing—literally. Hundreds of concerts, improvisations with more people than you can imagine, and with each concert a new sonic exploration and often a discovery worth remembering added to the ever-expanding catalog of bizarre [woodwind] effects.”

In a sense, free improvisation is almost Buddha-like in its presentation and performance—everything an artist can do is collapsed like a star into a black hole until it's a single point, and is then utilized at the drop of a hat. One needs to keep this in mind when listening to this sort of music: otherwise, frustration is sure to follow.

# What is a Game Piece?

Let’s divide the term “game piece” into its original components. What’s a game? A pleasurable activity, usually played between two or more people, wherein certain rules apply: chess, checkers, poker, Monopoly, Dungeons & Dragons—the list goes on. A piece, in this sense of the word, refers to a musical composition. Essentially, a game piece is a composition that allows musicians to interact with each other. As opposed to free improvisation, where a laissez-faire approach dominates, musicians must, at least in some degree, agree to a certain set of rules. It’s, as paradoxical as it sounds, structured improvisation.

## A (Very) Brief History of Game Pieces

Neither structured improvisation nor game pieces are innovations brought on solely by John Zorn; other avant-garde composers such as **Christian Wolff** and **Iannis Xenakis** have also created their own game pieces, and are considered integral parts of this area of experimental music. However, Zorn is perhaps the most well-known practitioner of game pieces, with his piece *Cobra* being the most famous out of his repertoire. Zorn’s early career included a handful of different game pieces, each named after a real-life game: *Pool*, *Hockey*, *Lacrosse*, *Archery*, and two inspired by and named after film-maker Jean-Luc Godard and writer Mickey Spillane. *Cobra*, finished in 1984, broke through the above pieces, though, becoming a staple of avant-garde music that is still performed by today’s avant-garde musicians.

## How Does *Cobra* Work?

All the musicians performing the piece have to have some way of communicating with each other that doesn’t completely interfere with their playing. Therefore, the two most important parts of *Cobra* (or any game piece, really) are a set of cards and a prompter that communicates said cards.

Below is a reproduction of *Cobra* (another one is available [here](#) or [here](#) if you find this one confusing):

### Cobra

**MOUTH yellow**

- P** POOL
- R** RUNNER
- S** SUBSTITUTE
- SX** SUBSTITUTE CROSSFADE

**NOSE white**

- D** DUOS
- T** TRADES
- E** EVENTS 1, 2 OR 3
- B** BUDDIES

**EYE orange**

- CT** CARTOON TRADES
- CO** ORDERED CARTOON TRADES

**EAR blue**

- GA** G = G M Δ
- GA** M = M G Δ
- VA** VOLUME Δ

**HEAD red**

- S** SOUND MEMORY 1
- S** SOUND MEMORY 2
- S** SOUND MEMORY 3

**GUERRILLA SYSTEMS** Squad Leader + 2 Spotters

**TACTICS**

♂ 1. Imitate

↔ 2. Trade

— 3. Hold

⊙ 4. Capture

↻ 5. Switch/Crossfade

} to next downbeat

**OPERATIONS (Squad Leader ONLY)**

1 DIVISI

2 INTERCUT

3 FENCING

Memory drone, squad leader tactics, and systems control

Locus Unit return to same sound

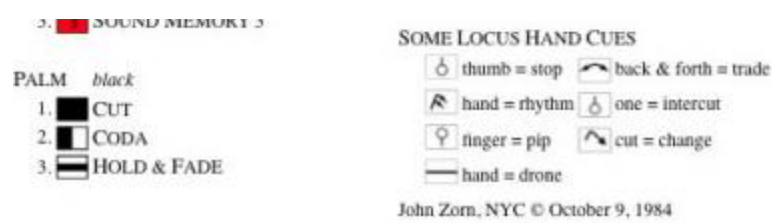
Unit with alternates

G, UNIT LIFE SPAN: 7 Downbeats

SPY may cut unit during OPERATIONS ONLY if unidentified.

Unit members may cut at any time

End of DIVISI superimposition



Now, all these symbols appear on different cards, and are prompted by certain gestures, as marked on the image. A musician will, for instance, point to a part of his/her body (in this case, either the mouth, nose, eye, ear, head or palm) and hold up a number of fingers corresponding to a certain card, which the prompter will pick up and present to the rest of the group. Each card represents a different event happening. For instance, the Sound Memory cards, when activated, tell a performer to memorize exactly what he/she is playing at the moment of activation, and to repeat that sound until another change is called. If the Trades card is activated, the person who asked for the card will improvise and swap with someone of his/her choice.

If that wasn't difficult enough to follow, there's also a way to virtually ignore all of the said instructions. Prior to a *Cobra* performance, each musician is given a headband. Apart from the hand gestures, the headband, when worn, signifies this musician as a Squad Leader (with new gestures now available—on the right-hand side of the above image). As the title suggests, the Squad Leader basically takes over, and is free to do what he/she wishes.

This might all seem nearly impossible to remember, but, like a real game, it's easier experienced. Dylan van der Schyff's article *The Free Improvisation Game: Preforming John Zorn's Cobra* (a paper worth [reading in full](#) if you find this subject at all interesting) provides a unique look from the viewpoint of the musician attempting (and succeeding) to play the piece, and even he notes its supposed difficulty:

“By the time Zorn was finished explaining things, which he did very quickly, many of us were still looking back and forth at each other with visible signs of confusion. But Zorn didn't seem worried. He assured us that like any other game we would learn *Cobra* most easily by playing it; he kept reminding us, “All you have to do is play.”

All of this—the gestures, the freedom, and the communication (or, sometimes lack thereof) between musicians—makes *Cobra* a highly personal piece. No two performances of it are the same, because the entire piece depends on the musicians involved and what they decide literally at that moment in time. It doesn't even have a set time; the piece simply ends when a performer gestures for an ending.

## Listening to (and Watching) *Cobra*

Despite all that one could possibly know about *Cobra*, it just isn't very possible to decipher all the parts of a recording of it without

actually being present at the time of its performance and seeing the various prompts being utilized. (This isn't to say that it can't be done, but the amount of time one could theoretically spend dissecting just a single performance of *Cobra* would be frustrating, to say the least.) If you don't understand what I mean, just take a look at a video of the New England Conservatory of Music performing the piece:

To take away all those images, of who wants which card and so on puts listeners in the dark. Obviously, you can get out of a completely dark cave, but the difficulty is enormous.

Consider also that the target audience has shifted. For nearly any piece of art created, there's an expected audience, even if it's just the artist making it. With *Cobra* and other game pieces, it's not as much for the spectators' or listeners' entertainment and thought as it is for the musicians performing. Each gesture, in a sense, becomes a premise or rebuttal for the musicians, with the end goal of a musical dialogue of sorts.

But while I say this, I also think that these pieces are still enjoyable to just listen to on their own. Just the thought that these are musicians virtually conducting themselves, and the things that they can come up with at the drop of a hat is nothing short of amazing. For example, listen to "Tamangiri" off of the 2002 release *Cobra: John Zorn's Game Pieces Volume 2*, and note how coherent it sounds, despite it being improvised:

If this is the first time you've listened to improvisation before, I highly advise you to keep your mind open before passing any judgments. You might end up not liking it—and there's nothing wrong with having your own opinion—but it deserves a fair chance first. Any improvisation, structured or free, doesn't function in the same way that music on the radio does

## Conclusion

Let's go back for a moment and repeat what a game piece actually is: a musical composition subject to few and far between rules, musical chess, an aural conversation—but with gestures and symbols in lieu of traditional syntax. It's a blending of free improvisation with structure, yet, in an almost Zen-like manner, it's both and neither. It resides in a gray area, which allows for a near infinite amount of possibilities—musicians can take the structure that, as mentioned at the beginning of this article, is inherent to music, but balance and temper it with the freedom and spontaneity that improvisation provides.

Even more than that, Zorn's game pieces are, much like the composer's other works, a significant evolution in music, though perhaps not as large or recognized as, say, the initial free jazz movement, or the advent of heavy metal. Nonetheless, these

pieces push what *can* be, rather than simply going along with what *is*. *Cobra*, in a way, is the ancient Roman god Janus, whose two heads face opposite directions, to point to what has and what will be—and perhaps that’s the sign of true art: something creatively-minded that looks to the past while jumping to the future.